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AN ART-MUSÉE IN AMERICA.

AND are we to have an Art-Musée in this country? The hope seems at first too daring, the difficulty too solid. Even after getting over the absorbing dedication of the American mind to material comfort, and its rooted conviction that "old masters" are bores, there remains the immense mercantile barrier between a modern purchaser and almost any authentic work of ancient art. All the Raphaels in existence, for example, are scheduled and known, and quite outside the market; hardly once in a century is there opportunity for a far country to possess itself of a work of this class.

Certain gentlemen of New York, however, believing that something might be done, have formed a corporation, and dedicated their best efforts to the founding of an Art Museum. The ripening of our civilization, so they think, demands it; and as for the proper moment to utter the word "go," there never is any time like the present. The institution was already chartered, and the assistance of the city guaranteed, when the Franco-Prussian War broke out, disturbing private fortunes, dispersing works of *virtù*, and locking up the public funds of continental states. At the climax of the struggle, a trustee of the just-created American institution, happening to be in Europe, heard of the sale of a hundred pictures by the most famous Flemish hands—pictures which would precisely fill up the *lacune* or shortcomings of the City Museum of Brussels, but which that corporation had no money to buy; a similar collection, approaching the same number, was contemporaneously offered in Paris. The two galleries, containing admirable pictures by great names, were just calculated to form the nucleus of a new Louvre. The traveler acted with the national promptness. Asking his bankers for credit in the large sum which would buy the two collections, he became, in his own person, their owner. He then telegraphed to the Museum at home, offering his purchase at cost price. If his coadjutors had declined to father his action, he would have found himself the startled possessor of a princely picture gallery. But the brave deed was acknowledged by the vote of the trustees—though by no means without the protest of dissenters, the true Elijah Pograms of the year of grace, 1871. And so, by the ready pluck of a single member of the Board, the Metropolitan Art Museum has greatness thrust upon it. Meantime the works of art are safely stored at No. 681 Fifth Avenue, in New York, awaiting the uprising of the art-palace that is to be.

We are none too learned, in this country, on the subject of art history, and we are none too credulous of the correggiosity of Correggio, or of the value of Raphaels and Titians. I have wished, however, to give at least the impression that the pictures of the Museum are beyond dispute as to their authenticity, which is the simple indubitable fact. And now, if you would like, we will take a short promenade through the galleries. In such a stroll, sympathetic companionship is everything. I will take for my partner no city belle, with her mind dispersed in the flowers of her summer bonnet, or wrapped neatly in her laced napkin; I will seek some impressionable soul. I will take, if you please, you, Judd's "Margaret," flower of Yankee girls, most original and fresh of spirits born to this continent. You are ignorant, but you desire to be improved; you have picked up scraps of Greek, you have devoured all the books that came before you, you doubtless know, in theory, all about the great masters of painting and their triumphs. Meantime, you are untraveled, and profoundly unacquainted with the works of the grand colorists. We will pause before some of these specimens, fresh as when painted hundreds of years ago, and you shall tell me what you see, and I will try to tell you what I have learned.

We march straight to the end of the large gallery, and there we observe a great canvas, filled with figures the size of life, all grouped around a noble-looking old man, who sits upon the ground. The catalogue tells us that the subject is "Alexander rebuked by Diogenes," painted by Gaspard de Crayer, a contemporary of Rubens, who died at Ghent, in 1669; and that the city of Ghent presented this painting to the Empress Josephine, who placed it in her gallery at Malmaison. You look at the group, Margaret, with your frank eyes. I point out to you the dignity, the almost courtly ease, with which the old philosopher waves the conqueror out of his sunshine; and the fresh astonishment, without indignation, of the young lord of the world; and the wide-eyed surprise of the

attendants, and the saucy and quite disrespectful amusement of the lad who bears the train of Alexander. I see, however, that you demur at something; and this is what you say, with your admirable, sincere desire to get at the exact truth.

"It is animated, and I think it is a picture of living men. But I thought Alexander of Macedon would look more like a Greek statue, and not so much like a handsome French actor, and I did not suppose he would have his train borne. And I thought Diogenes was a cynic philosopher, and all lean and scornful, and that he would be in old rags."

These strictures of yours, Margaret, give me the opportunity I wanted. I want to tell you how it is necessary to look at art history. In the first place, this brave painter, De Crayer, was born almost three hundred years ago. He had doubtless read a good deal of ancient history, and had probably seen a few Greek marbles. But he had access to no libraries filled with engravings of antiques—he had met with none of that minute study of antiquity which for us, in one way or another, has permeated the very air. He has seen, in some emperor's or elector's palace, a suite of late Roman armor, and has gratefully and faithfully copied it for his Alexander; the little fact that Macedonian kings did not have trains to be borne was quite out of the compass of the learning accessible to him; similarly, the types he selects are the types around him; he wants to paint a godlike young conqueror, and he chooses the handsomest Flemish beau of his acquaintance, or makes a flattered likeness of some aristocratic patron, preserving all the sanguine Netherland temperament. When you grasp, Margaret, the little fact, that you are not precisely to go to the old painters for strict historic presentment of sacred and profane events, you will be able to look at pictures like this, more truly enjoying, as you are more truly just. And how much is there to reward us! What a blood-red tide of life animates the strong and fine limbs of these Flemish-Greeks of the painting! How they seem to live, to talk to each other! And how far *we* are behind, in all great pictorial qualities, these unread, gay, provincial artists of flat-meadowed Flanders, and of the seventeenth century!

In a similar view, another life-sized subject, opposite this, at the extremity of the gallery, will perhaps shock you even more. It is "Jason Slaying the Dragon," and gaining possession of the fleece. You know all about Jason and the Argonauts, and your fancy has loved to wander, over azure seas, in the company of the first great explorer. But did Jason look like *this*? The painter, Van Diepenbeeck, who was born in 1607, has dressed him in a complete suit of dark steel armor of about that date, such as he saw on the knights in the parades at Antwerp; and the posture of the golden fleece upon the tree-branch is evidently imitated from the well-known Order of the name, the *toison d'or*, which he saw every day at the collars of the noblemen of the court. The question is not, artistically speaking, whether the picture gives a feeling of the true classic grace we would see in a cameo of the same subject dug up at Athens, but whether Mr. Van Diepenbeeck imagined his hero with distinctness and nobility, whether he knew how to paint the armor he thought fit to select, whether, in fact, through the imperfection of his opportunities, shone forth the grand incommunicable secret of high art. You are glad to forgive anachronisms to Shakespeare, Margaret, forgive them to these Netherlanders, who had not the advantage of living under the most learned princess the world contained. With this hint, and this start given you, I am sure you will be ready to admire the fine live Jason, so calm yet so ardent, attired in a caparison two thousand years too late for him, and meeting without a tremor this prodigious dragon, that whisks around him all the scaly horrors and exaggerations of the middle ages.

And now, I think you are ready—more ready than you would have been—for the great Rubens himself. This holy family of his, called the "Return from Egypt," was painted in his early prime. The Jesuits—then in the vigor of their organizations, their tremendous influence lashing like a network of nerves every throne and population of Europe, and the personal magnetism of Loyola not yet faded out—desired the most pompous canvases for their churches, as a part of their general system of impressing upon the people the grandeur and beauty of the society. Rubens was only too ready to meet ecclesiastical orders given in this spirit. If you ask me, my dear Margaret, if this is a religious picture, I answer that I do not believe that religion, in any mystical or

chastening sense, was ever in the least comprehended by Peter Paul Rubens, though he has here given us a very tender and lovely image in the pleading, yet resigned fatigue of the foot-weary Boy. The Virgin is simply a stately Flemish woman, opulent of her natural charms; the Joseph, in a tempestuous head of black hair, looks as if he might be a reminiscence of some beggar-bandit encountered by Rubens in his then recent visit to Italy; and your Puritan prejudice will be rather shocked, my dear companion, at the introduction of the Eternal Father in the clouds above, in the person of a small-headed senile-looking Man. This great panel, however, in its rich, simple, glowing breadths of form and color, was superbly adapted for its place. It rose above the altar and the many-candled choir-space of the basilica; sweet ivory-faced Catholic Flemish ladies knelt before it to partake the Host; and fiery-souled young priests of the Jesuits, gazing upon the large, up-floating forms of the divine Travelers, athwart the incense, were charged with that electric ambition which led them on their missions to Mexico or to Japan.

Two great masters who succeeded Rubens were Jordaens and Vandyck. Out of the three examples of Jordaens I will lead you, Margaret, to the best and brightest, the "Holy Family," with the family of John the Baptist. You must look upon the canvas for what it is, a mirror of some poor neighbor-family who happened to live near Jordaens, in Antwerp! What provincial, vacant simplicity in the Baby's pleased smile! What familiar perfection in the expressions of the old folks, watching with toothless laughter the introduction and first overtures of two petted babes! And, everywhere, what character, grouping, flesh-color, and light and shade!

By Vandyck, besides his portrait of a young lady, I must point out to you one of his rarer sacred pictures, which Napoleon's brother, Joseph, abstracted from the Royal Museum at Madrid. It is "St. Martha Interceding for the Cessation of a Plague, at Tarascon." You will like the sweet, motherly pleading of Martha, who asks of Heaven a favor that she thinks so obviously just and proper, so evidently what she would do herself, if she had the power, that no suspicion of a refusal crosses her smiling face.

And now you are already tired, dear, curious Margaret, and I have no chance to show you the capital portraits—this of Paris Bordone's, representing a young knight in all the loveliness that Titian himself could have conferred, this of Franz Hals', depicting a vigorous Dutchwoman in a prodigious burst of laughter, or this soberer head of a burgomaster by Van der Helst, so rare for character and unction; nor dare I ask you to go back to the beginnings of oil-painting, which you know was invented or propagated by Van Eyck in these same Low Countries, and thence transmitted into Italy by the theft of that capable rogue, Antonio of Messina. By an honest pupil of Van Eyck than that same Antonio, by Gerard Van der Meire, the Museum shows an "An Adoration of the Wise Men," quaint but solemn, and finished in parts like a photograph. Nor, coming down to later times, can I dwell with you upon this picture of still-life by the great Spaniard, Velasquez, who you know was found in his youth painting magnificent fruit-pieces for a hard living, and only after argument and persuasion induced to try the human figure, which he afterwards so royally mastered. Nor dare I pause before the small Dutch landscapes, so simple yet so faultless—in some whereof you may count the little bricks of the houses; nor the round, ripe fruits of Snyders, who used to help Rubens himself with his animals and accessories; nor the other fine fruit-pieces of men like De Heem and Weenix; nor, finally, can I call much of your attention to the flower-pieces of ladies like Rachel Ruysch or Margareta Haverman—pieces which, good as they are, indicate the decay of a nation's art, and show the Dutch school burying itself, as is neatly said by Théophile Gautier, in a tulip.

No, I can ask no more of your attention, Judd's "Margaret," to these new and fatiguing ideas. I remit you, willingly, to the repose between your covers, only glad if you and your bright compeers shall feel tempted to come again. If you happened to be Parisian young ladies, we should soon see you all perched on the summits of stepladders, intent upon the canvases, whereon you would be *copying* these same old masters, like the bevy of fair girls one sees at such work in the Louvre. May the day soon come when your appreciation and admiration shall reach *that*, the sincerest form of flattery!

—Erastus South.